

Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 266 pp.

Paul Charles Merkley's *Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel* holds no punches in his analysis of Christian organizations toward the State of Israel from its birth in 1948 to the present day. Merkley, an ardent Christian Zionist and evangelical, lauds the dominantly pro-Israel stance of the evangelical Christian movement while he rails against the generally hostile attitudes toward Israel prevalent among liberal Christian organizations. Merkley provides critical analysis in an area seldom studied in great depth among scholars, and he writes with a verve that enlivens his prose and engages the reader. Although it would be difficult to measure Christian attitudes among millions of Christians around the world, Merkley focuses almost solely on organizations for his information including the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, as well as many other Christian associations. More problematic, however, is Merkley's blatant partisanship for the Zionist cause which leads him to belittle his opponents' views on several key issues without enough analysis to justify such dismissals.

Merkley opens his study with a brief review of Israel's founding in 1948, and the reaction by Christians (primarily American Christians) to this development. Like many other scholars, he argues that the unique circumstances leading up to the establishment of Israel, namely world sympathy over the Holocaust and the thousands of homeless Jews lingering in Displaced Persons camps throughout Europe after World War II, led to a situation where most Christian organizations accepted or at least tolerated the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine. Merkley finds that this relative consensus among many Christian organizations, however, quickly crumbled in the years following Israel's birth.

For the next five decades, Merkley contends liberal Christians (a term he never adequately defines) tend to criticize Israel to the point where they "feel free openly to question the wisdom of bringing Israel into existence in the first place" (24). In contrast, Merkley argues evangelical Christians "generally approve of Israel's performance as a nation over the first half-century" (24). He properly acknowledges exceptions to his claim when he cites Reinhold Niebuhr's favorable stance toward Israel and the two organizations he helmed to win early

Christian support for Israel: the American Christian Palestine Committee and the Christian Council for Palestine. This concession is important, and Merkley should include more exceptions than Niebuhr. Other leading liberal Christians worked diligently for Israel's creation and survival including American Federation of Labor President William Green and Congress of Industrial Organizations President Philip Murray. Merkley should acknowledge the larger number of liberal Christians such as these who played a seminal role in aiding the establishment of Israel.

Nonetheless, Merkley makes a compelling case that in the immediate years following statehood, most liberal Christian organizations as well as the Catholic Church adopted a hostile attitude toward Israel. One organization Merkley highlights, the World Council of Churches (WCC) serves as his representative body for Christian liberalism as it constitutes an attempt by hundreds of Christian churches worldwide to develop a united Christian Church. Created in 1948, Merkley argues the WCC became influenced by liberation theology during the 1960s in an attempt to appeal to academics and scholars. Merkley takes a dim view of its influence on western academics as well as the WCC, where he contends it led to the "explicit adoption of Third World rhetoric and Marxist-Leninist insights on imperialism" (32). With this newfound liberation theology, the WCC came to adopt a critical attitude toward Israel while championing the Palestinian cause. Merkley implies that this attitude infected much, if not all, of liberal Christian attitudes throughout the world, yet he rarely acknowledges the view held by these Christians as well as many Arabs that Israel represents western imperialism in the Arab world's backyard. Surely, this issue needs to be addressed in more depth than simply dismissing as ludicrous the perception held by millions of people that Israel is an imperial, western presence in the Middle East.

In stark contrast to liberal Christians and Catholics, Merkley presents evangelical Christians as the backbone of Christian Zionism, ardent supporters of Israel and its policy. Although Merkley finds anti-Zionists within the evangelical movement, they are the exceptions rather than the rule. Moreover, he insists, many evangelicals look at the success of the Orthodox Jews in enforcing religious observances within Israeli society as a positive alternative to the American model of the "radical" separation of church and state. Of course, within this analysis of the relationship between evangelical

Christians and Israel, Merkley rejects a key concern among many Jews within Israel and abroad. For these Jews, the sole reason behind evangelical support for Israel relates to the fulfillment of End Times biblical prophecy whereby the return of all the Jews to Israel means the second coming of Jesus, and the fulfillment of scriptures. Merkley finds this explanation a canard that unfairly lumps all evangelicals with End Times pamphleteers. However, Merkley fails to address the other suspicion many Jews hold with regard to evangelical Christian support for Israel—namely the concern that their support for Israel exists solely because they wish to see all Jews emigrate from their countries, ending any Jewish presence in those countries.

The rise of Christian Zionism has led to a remarkable change in American politics. Republican politicians now rival their Democratic colleagues in their unquestioned support for Israel. This comes in direct response to the intense pressure of the evangelical influence on the party, which demands Israel be supported in its policies. This development within American politics has become so prevalent, Merkley contends that the Christian Zionist movement “has been a more constant political resource for Israel than the ‘Jewish vote’” (195). Undoubtedly, Israel’s government has grown to appreciate evangelical support so much in the last three decades that the Israeli government has done much to appease their sensibilities. In one instance, Merkley notes the Israeli policy of prohibiting cinemas to carry movies judged to be offensive to the religious feelings of Christians (Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* being one such film banned during the 1970s). Typical of Merkley’s particularly partisan writing, he fails to mention the criticism of such a policy; which constitutes outright censorship by the Israeli government to satisfy a political ally.

When it comes to Israel’s policies towards Christians living in Israel, Merkley finds that Israel can do little wrong. He notes that in the last fifty years, Israel is the only country in the Middle East where the Christian population has increased while everywhere else in the Middle East, the Christian population has decreased, in many cases dramatically. This proves for Merkley another example of Israel’s positive attitude toward the Christian community while most of the Arab countries treat their Christian communities with contempt. Additionally, Merkley hails the peace and relative order under the Israeli government with regard to the numerous Christian communities within Israel. Prior to 1948, Merkley notes, violence and

riots broke out among the Christian communities quite often. Yet many Christians in Israel and in the surrounding Arab countries criticize Israel. Merkley contends this criticism has more to do with a desire by many Arab Christians to relate to their Arab Muslim neighbors or due to a fear of persecution by the Muslim majority. According to *shar'ia* law, a Muslim should be executed for converting publicly to any other religion. Merkley notes western scholars focus on the "Basic Law" which historically protected Christian and non-Muslims living in Muslim countries, yet the law of *shar'ia* paints a more complicated picture, one in which many Christians may fear revealing their faith. Furthermore, since many Middle Eastern Christians of western denominations adopt a hostile attitude toward Israel, western churches tend to also adopt negative attitudes toward Israel in an attempt to appease their congregants.

Merkley spends some time analyzing Islamic attitudes toward Christianity in general and presents a picture of cultures in conflict. Typical of Merkley, he finds most of the fault for the cultural conflict with Muslims. He notes that "Islamic scholars have maintained a pristine uncritical attitude towards Islamic texts in all arenas of public discussion." (109). Conversely he laments, "They are assisted in this by the readiness of Western scholars to join in on denigrations of the imperialistic record of the Christian West." (109). Merkley delves into Islamic tradition and finds hostility toward Christianity and Judaism that is unlikely to ever be overcome. In one instance, Merkley refers to the Khudaibiya agreement, where Muhammad made a temporary peace agreement with non-Muslims until he was not strong enough militarily to destroy them. Merkley charges that Arafat has adopted this philosophy towards Israel whereby he engaged in the peace process, but knew he would unleash a violent struggle once he believed he had the strength to do so.

Such polemical accusations make Merkley's work a controversial one that creates as many questions as it hopes to answer. He never shies from expressing his beliefs throughout the book, allowing the reader to recognize where the author is coming from. A more judicious approach, however, may have provided a more balanced perspective, one that could expound his contentions while better acknowledging the opposing point of view.

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